

September 5, 2005

Palestinian Legislator Pleads Guilty to Assisting Militant Group

By GREG MYRE

JERUSALEM, Sept. 4 - A prominent member of the Palestinian parliament, Husam Khader, pleaded guilty on Sunday in an Israeli military court to charges of assisting an armed Palestinian faction that has carried out many attacks against Israel, the military said.

Before his arrest two years ago, he was best known as a leading critic of Yasir Arafat, the Palestinian leader who died last November.

Mr. Khader frequently accused the Palestinian Authority of corruption and often referred to the Palestinian leadership as a "mafia."

But Israel said Mr. Khader, who is in his mid-40's and comes from the Balata refugee camp in Nablus, also helped finance attacks by the militant group Al Aksa Martyrs Brigades.

The group was responsible for many shootings and bombings in the past several years and is linked to the Fatah movement, which Mr. Arafat led until his death. Mr. Khader was considered a rising figure in Fatah despite his differences with Mr. Arafat and other Fatah leaders.

Israeli officials have often accused Palestinian political leaders of involvement in the violence. However, the arrest and prosecution of such figures has been relatively rare.

As part of a plea agreement, Mr. Khader admitted Sunday to transferring money to Al Aksa for the purpose of buying weapons, the military said in a statement. The cell that received the money attempted a suicide bombing in the West Bank in January 2003, but security forces thwarted the attack, the military said.

Mr. Khader's lawyer, Riad Anis, said his client had given money to a "Fatah activist," but had no knowledge of the plans to carry out an attack, Reuters reported. Mr. Anis said Mr. Khader was innocent, but agreed to the plea arrangement "because he wanted to reduce the duration of the sentence."

Sentencing is set for next month.

Before his arrest, Mr. Khader described himself as a political leader, though he also said he supported attacks on Israeli soldiers and settlers in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Many Palestinians support such attacks, regarding them as acts of legitimate resistance, while Israel considers them acts of terrorism.

The most prominent case of a prosecution of a Palestinian leader by Israel in recent years involved a close associate of Mr. Khader, Marwan Barghouti, the West Bank leader of

Fatah and a fellow member of parliament. He was seen as a major figure in the Palestinian uprising against Israel, and remains hugely popular among young militants.

Last year, an Israeli civilian court convicted Mr. Barghouti of involvement in the killings of five Israelis, and he is serving five life sentences.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told Israel's Justice Ministry on Sunday to alter a policy denying Arab citizens harmed by Jewish militant attacks the same government aid accorded to victims of Palestinian violence. The issue arose after the families of the four Israeli Arabs killed last month by a Jewish deserter from the army had been judged ineligible for the monthly compensation payments that go to terror victims and their families.

In another development, the Islamic faction Hamas for the first time disclosed the identities of the leaders of its armed wing by posting photos and brief biographies on its Web site on Saturday.

Hamas has carried out the most suicide bombings against Israel and contends that its attacks were responsible for Israel's departure from Gaza. The information on the leaders of its armed wing was seen as part of Hamas's campaign to claim responsibility for the Israeli pullout.

The leader of the armed wing, Muhammad Deif, is already well known as a master bomb maker. He has been in hiding in Gaza for years, and Israel has tried to kill him several times.

Mr. Deif appeared in a video released a week ago, saying Hamas would keep trying to destroy Israel.